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SUBJECT: THE IRAQ MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT'S EVOLVING ROLE

REF: 08 BAGHDAD 3565

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Ministry of Environment (MoEnv) lacks sufficient training and equipment to execute its main responsibilities of environmental monitoring and clean up, Minister Narmin Othman told EMIN on January 22. Demining is presently a MoEnv responsibility, but the Ministry of Defense continues to encroach on this mission. A key responsibility for MoEnv is the survey and clean-up of approximately 110 contaminated sites, 25 of which were identified in a 166-page 2005 United Nations Environment Program report (UNEP) as Iraq's most dangerous "hot spots." MoEnv has allocated funds to clean up one site per year and claims to have completed clean-up at three sites (with UNEP assistance) and commenced at a fourth. The MoEnv is responsible for water quality and wildlife monitoring in the marsh region, while the Ministry of Water Resources has responsibility to supply the necessary water. Due to water shortages caused upstream by dam projects in Turkey and flow diversion in Iran, she does not believe the marsh can be restored much more than the 40%-50% level that has already been reached. GOI responsibility for oil spill response and cleanup in Iraq remains a nebulous topic. MoEnv has oil spill monitoring responsibility, implying it is up to the Ministry of Oil (MoO) to perform the actual immediate response and clean up duties. The Minister admitted GOI's ongoing negotiations with the Marine Emergency Mutual Aid Center (MEMAC) were "not going well," and said responsibility for that specific issue had been taken from MoEnv and handed over to the Prime Minister's legal advisor. End summary.

Environment: A Novel Issue in Iraq

¶2. (SBU) Minister of Environment Narmin Othman told EMIN on January 22 that among the Ministry of Environment's (MoEnv) greatest needs is to build expertise. "Everything linked to the environment is new in Iraq," she said, underscoring her ongoing challenge to bring environmental issues to the attention of both the Government of Iraq (GOI) and its citizens. Major projects in Iraq now require an environmental impact statement, some of which are prepared by the MoEnv and others by private companies. The Minister claimed she receives daily phone calls from various organizations throughout Iraq complaining that the MoEnv is holding up progress. "I do not care -- I work for Iraq, not the special interest groups who think they deserve exceptional treatment."

¶3. (SBU) The MoEnv lacks proper training and equipment to execute its main responsibilities of environmental monitoring and clean up, Othman said, with emphasis on the ministry's limited capacity to write reports. EMIN, stressing USG continued commitment to help build GOI capacity, noted that many of our bilateral environmental issues will now be addressed through the Strategic Framework Agreement under the Information and Technology Services Joint Coordination

Committee (JCC). Othman said she had already received a letter from the GOI appointing her as a member of that JCC.

MoEnv's Role in Demining, "Hot Spots," Marshes, and Oil Spills

¶4. (SBU) Demining is presently a MoEnv responsibility, but the Ministry of Defense continues to encroach on this mission. "I think it is a corruption issue -- the MoD wants all of the money for training and mine clean-up operations for themselves." According to the Minister, the Ottawa Qfor themselves." According to the Minister, the Ottawa Treaty on land mines requires each country's mine action authority to be overseen by a civilian agency. Iraq has over 25 million mines throughout the country, she said, with the vast majority in the north (from Saddam's repression of the Kurds in the 1980s and 1990s) and in the southern provinces from the Iran-Iraq War and First Gulf War. (Comment: MNF-I told EconOff that the United Nations Development Program's Mine Action Team has engaged the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), MoD, and MoEnv recently on numerous occasions to negotiate an agreement that would maintain MoEnv responsibility for this issue. The PMO has not yet made a decision and the responsibility, for now, remains with MoEnv. There are many examples of countries that have their national mine action authority under the Ministry of Defense, in full accord with the Ottawa Treaty. End comment.)

¶5. (SBU) A key ongoing issue for MoEnv is the survey and clean-up of approximately 110 contaminated sites, 25 of which were identified in a 166-page 2005 United Nations Environment Program report (UNEP) as Iraq's most dangerous "hot spots."

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The UNEP report also identified 5 locations for priority attention. MoEnv has allocated funds to clean up one site per year and claims to have completed clean-up at three sites (with UNEP assistance) and commenced at a fourth. Othman added, however, that these cleanups are not done very well and often are not complete. (Comment: The Minister also claimed depleted uranium (DU) as a particular environmental threat in Iraq, but continually mischaracterized the danger as a radiation problem. EmbOff tried to correct this misconception, noting that DU dust can be dangerous if inhaled, but DU is not otherwise dangerous as a radiation threat or ground water contaminant. It did not appear that the Minister recognized the distinction. End comment.)

¶6. (SBU) The MoEnv is responsible for water quality and wildlife monitoring in the marsh region, while the Ministry of Water Resources has "responsibility for filling the marshes," she said. MoEnv is fulfilling their water monitoring responsibilities through an ongoing joint project with the UNEP, Government of Italy, and Government of Japan. "I brought peace to the region," she claimed, through her efforts to inform local stakeholders and build consensus for united action. "Like the Titanic, we were all going to go down together if we did not come to an understanding." The GOI Minister of the Marshlands, she claimed, "is hunting in the marshes, killing the birds, and wants to introduce new fish species, whereas I am trying to protect the fish that are already there." Due to water shortages caused upstream by dam projects in Turkey and flow diversion in Iran, she does not believe the marsh can be restored much more than the 40%-50% level that has already been reached. (Comment: Drought persists throughout the Middle East and water shortage to the marshes is attributed predominantly to drought. End comment.). She hopes to make the Iraqi marshes a National Heritage Site and ensure they do not lose their hard-won gains. (Comment: The Minister will travel to Nairobi, Kenya, on February 14th to attend the 25th Session of the Governing Council of the Global Ministerial Forum. She will be heading a panel on gender and environment as well as delivering a brief on the Iraq marshes. End comment.)

¶7. (SBU) GOI responsibility for oil spill response and cleanup in Iraq remains a nebulous topic. The Minister said MoEnv has oil spill monitoring responsibility, implying it was up to the Ministry of Oil (MoO) to perform the actual immediate response and clean up duties. She said the Ministry sent a letter to MoO underscoring the dangers of the dilapidated state of the large southern export pipeline which is already many years beyond its design lifetime. "All of Iraq expired 25 years ago," she quipped, specifically citing water, sewage, and oil infrastructure. The Minister admitted GOI's ongoing negotiations with the Marine Emergency Mutual Aid Center (MEMAC) were "not going well," and said responsibility for that specific issue had been taken from MoEnv and handed over to the PM's legal advisor, Dr. Fadel. (Comment: CAPT Janahi, MEMAC Director, recently confirmed to EconOff that Iraq had not yet paid its yearly MEMAC membership dues or arrears (reftel). End comment.)

Comment

¶8. (SBU) MoEnv handles a hodgepodge of issues and has an uphill battle, as do its counterparts in other developing countries, convincing other GOI ministries and agencies that environmental protection and remediation efforts should not be sacrificed for the sake of economic development. Despite its shortcomings in financing and technical capability, Qits shortcomings in financing and technical capability, however, MoEnv has the lead on several important issues that are common to the region such as a fragile desert ecosystem. Developing and implementing the appropriate policies requires a coordinated interagency effort. We will use the planned Environment Working Group under the Strategic Framework Agreement structure to explore ways to bolster MoEnv capabilities and their position within the GOI.
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